

# HILAIRE BELLOC BITTERLY ASSAILS BRITISH PLUTOCRACY

By HILAIRE BELLOC.

The following unusual and important article has come to THE SUNDAY SUN. Its author, Hilaire Belloc, is one of the foremost of English writers on war problems and THE SUNDAY SUN presents the article in the belief that whatever Mr. Belloc has to say is interesting, but without in any way expressing its opinion of the writer's political creed.

THE chief task facing those men in England to-day who wish to see a resurrected and strengthened England arise from this war is (to put it in the most general terms) the task of making what was an aristocracy and is now a plutocracy act like a democracy.

In the matter of the war and its peace the need is so urgent and the punishment threatening ignorance, corruption or a bad political machinery so evident and so tremendous that they have a better chance of accomplishing their object than heretofore.

Let me give at once an example that will show both the difficulty and the nature of such a task.

Not long since in England a brilliant journalist and editor, Mr. Cecil Chesterton, and I worked side by side for months making public the nature of parliamentary decline. After a general exposure in book and newspaper we proceeded to a particular case in proof, the business of the "Marconi" scandal.

It was one out of dozens of such things which are native to the atmosphere of the English Parliament, but it was an excellent working model with which to move our contemporaries.

Mr. Chesterton put it forth most clearly and fully. Of course all that could be concealed by the culprit was concealed—and still is—but the "Marconi" scandal was made an object lesson so reiterated and so insistent upon that nobody could ignore it. After several months of this prolonged action even the official Conservative press was compelled to discuss the misdeeds of the Liberals. In something like a year all the middle classes and great sections even of the populace had at last appreciated, though imperfectly, what the governing classes in England had known all along, that bribery was a commonplace in English political life, and that the professional politicians gave themselves and their relatives sums of money obtained directly and indirectly, by monopolies, special contracts, &c., out of the public pocket. I say, so far as plain statement and proof were concerned, all were at last convinced.

What was the result? Under the old aristocratic conditions in England which had been the strength of Protestant England since the fall of the monarchy in the seventeenth century the "Marconi" men would have been done for. Not that aristocracies are other than cynical but that their power depends upon a certain prestige, and members of their oligarchy discovered and exposed in an undignified position are thrust out of that oligarchy for the sake of its preservation.

Under a democracy the culprit would have been punished, for under a democracy public men are regarded not as masters but as servants. Dishonesty upon their part, though more frequently attempted perhaps than under other forms of government, is checked because it grows dangerous by the simple process of attaching unpleasant consequences to corruption. At best the culprit are imprisoned (like Garfunkel) or driven to suicide (like Rabinach) or they fly the country (like Hertz). At the least they suffer general contempt. Honest men refuse to associate with the tricksters. They have to hide and retire.

But under the present English regime of plutocracy neither of these



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two salutary processes of execution, the aristocratic or the democratic, was at work. The "Marconi" men remained in public life, and not only so remained but were regarded by their colleagues as peculiarly suitable to further and graver responsibilities as a consolation for their recent sad experience.

Why was this? It was due to effects of plutocracy working quite openly and patent to the observation of all: the first an indifference to right and wrong—the chief moral consequence of plutocracy; the second the direct power of great wealth in a plutocracy to govern to its own advantage—its chief material effect.

As to the first, men told you upon every side that it was quixotic and fanatical to set up an impossible standard of purity in public life; that there was no great harm in such things; that a fellow caught in some rather dirty action was probably fairly cunning or he would not have engaged in it, and that cunning was the chief requisite in an administrator and his greatest claim to our reverence. Of wisdom in contrast to cunning, of the fact that cunning is the opposite and corrosive of wisdom, as sloth and luxury are the opposites and corrosives of good breeding, opinion in general had become oblivious.

As to the second, it was simply a question of mechanism. There was no organ of expression that was not owned by the same plutocratic forces as had, in another aspect, worked the "Marconi" business. All the principal newspapers—almost in proportion to their circulation—first falsified and then hushed up the issue. A peerage was given to one newspaper proprietor (the second Harmsworth); a few other honors and salaries to the lesser ones, and the thing was over.

How does all this apply to the present crisis?

In the following manner:

England is at the present time under the acute, imperative necessity of

destroying Prussia. Its only impediment in the full accomplishment of this salutary execution is the power of a few rich men. If this country is persuaded to lag behind its allies in the hard task of victory, if it does not (1) fully support all its allies up to the complete defeat of the enemy, (2) use that defeat fully and help its allies wholeheartedly to eliminate the criminal power, then the future of Britain—whatever may be that of her allies—is beyond doubt. She will remain for long a great, somewhat amorphous commercial power, bound together by the interests of her merchants and financiers but increasingly lacking in coordination and losing wealth. As a spiritual and political force in the world she will decline very rapidly indeed.

Britain is clearly at once the chief objective against which a surviving Prussian State would direct itself and, from her dependence upon the sea, Britain is also the most vulnerable objective offered to such a foe. Her dependence upon the sea makes her the most vulnerable objective because any power commanding the sea excites the jealousy of all others, and because sea power depends in a great degree upon mechanical and limited things. A determined enemy with great material resources can build a fleet more easily and quickly build a great fleet than he can recreate a dominant army after defeat. Further, certain changes in marine attack and defence due to quite modern invention make security at sea much more gravely threatened by a much less expenditure of money than ever before.

Now the organism of a nation thus politically threatened is perhaps better defended by an aristocracy than by any other form of government. An aristocracy is vividly alive to the national interests, and is prompt, ruthless and exhaustive in the pursuit of them.

The old aristocratic England (which perished in our own time and before our own eyes) would have fallen upon this problem with the rapidity and directness of lightning. Its governing members would not only have expended all their energy against the

commercial terms to be imposed upon the enemy and their fear lest a complete victory for the Allies should interfere with private gain in commerce.

From the point of view of the English nation as a whole a victorious people has no economic advantage whatsoever in leaving the vanquished wealth. There is every advantage in leaving the vanquished laborious and productive of wealth; but the whole effort of the victor should be turned to the draining of that wealth, once produced, away from the vanquished and toward themselves.

Thus to exclude the goods of a conquered Germany from the British Isles is the act of an idiot. To permit a conquered Germany to build up new wealth wherewith to attack again is the act of a traitor. Yet these two policies alone are suggested by the stupid and the more intelligent sections of the English plutocracy respectively.

There is but one obvious public policy—the maintenance of a continual drain of wealth from a Germany conquered and compelled to export to our advantage. It is a policy the victor can impose most simply by lifelong indemnity, most drastically by the confiscation of mortgage and scrip with garrisons to maintain the treaty.

English private interests are at issue with such a policy. The financier has interests bound up with German interests; the merchant fears the ruin of his client.

There is here a very interesting example of private fortune misunderstanding its own advantage from its very avarice.

The financial interests—which are by the strongest things in Great Britain—thoroughly understand the taking of tribute from the occupied and subject territory of those whom they think very weak.

The whole history of Ireland is nothing else than that. Ireland, until George Wyndham's land act (and to some extent even since that act), was sending overseas masses of material in proportion to her wealth, as interest upon loans, which loans had been advanced to the landlord class by cosmopolitan finance.

The whole history of modern Egypt is nothing else. What the Egyptian produces beyond his bare livelihood and the cost of administration is paid as interest to the same cosmopolitan financiers, who caught in their net long ago the foolish and irresponsible monarch of the country.

It is perfectly clear that the economic fate of any conquered country could be settled upon the same lines. You can always so arrange matters that the vanquished have to produce wealth, indeed, but instead of retaining that wealth, shall regularly pass it over to the victors. If those members of the English plutocracy who happen to have no personal interests in Germany or Austria could be seen to this almost self-evident economic position the power of their great fortunes would no longer be an impediment to the complete destruction of the enemy.

But they cannot be got to see it. Even those wealthy men who have no interest in the enemy's country will almost certainly work to prevent the terms of peace from impoverishing the enemy.

Meanwhile those who have personal interests in the enemy territory (and these are very numerous) will be directly interested in preventing a complete victory; they are working actively against it at this moment. This is the first way in which the new plutocracy impedes the final success of the national arms.

The second way in which the danger manifests itself is through the preference of private fortune to public good in the matter of direct military expense.

The great war has cost the belligerents in material goods per month far more than the material goods which they can produce or procure or trade from abroad; at least, it has cost them an expense of material goods at a far higher rate than the rate at which wealth can be produced or demanded over and above the current necessities of national sustenance.

Therefore the great belligerent nations have had to fall back upon their accumulated reserve of wealth, to withdraw it from the production of further wealth, to consume it immediately and irreversibly upon the field of battle.

In part this accumulation has been directly expended in the prosecution of the war. In part it has been exchanged for material obtained from neutral countries. For instance, the British nation as a whole a victorious people has no economic advantage whatsoever in leaving the vanquished wealth. There is every advantage in leaving the vanquished laborious and productive of wealth; but the whole effort of the victor should be turned to the draining of that wealth, once produced, away from the vanquished and toward themselves.

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